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Imageries in “The Yellow Wallpaper” and “Bliss”

Abstract: Norms for women have always been more inflexible, unyielding, and more clearly defined than for men. Such an approach towards the ‘weaker sex’ rigidly demarcates attitude, and behaviour, while simultaneously conditioning interpretation in a culture. In this ethos, anything that deviates from the custom is marked out as ‘unnatural’. Women writers like Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Katherine Mansfield examine such ‘unnatural’ subjects and choose to review and render the inner self of these unaccommodated women through vivid imageries which establish a direct connection between the internal world of these women and their outside repressive and despotic reality. This paper looks into the imageries employed by Gilman and Mansfield in their respective short stories “The Yellow Wallpaper” and “Bliss” to illustrate the predicament of the women in these stories. It is only through these imageries that a lucid picture of the consciousness of these women is painted on the outside world which mostly is obstinate to the yearnings of these women.

Keywords: imagery, women, psyche, unnatural, reality, desire

The roles of men and women were never as clearly demarcated as in the Victorian period in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Prior to this period, the norms defining the roles of the two sexes were not so rigid. It was usual for women to work in the

family business while also attending to their domestic duties. However, as men began to commute to their work of place like factories or offices, one of the reasons for this being the Industrial Revolution, women were generally left at home to supervise over the domestic helps and hence came about a segregation of the duties of men and women. Women were further considered to be physically weak and morally superior to men and therefore best suited for domestic duties. They were not supposed to have views on society and political issues. As Debora Thomas puts it in “The Cult of Womanhood”, “Men perpetrated an ideological prison that subjected and silenced women”.

This role of the ‘Angel in the House’ confined women to specific attitudes and behavioural tendencies which they were forced to adopt and were expected to be ‘accomplished’. Caroline Bingley in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* lists the skills required by any young lady who considers herself accomplished: “A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages....; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions...” (ch. 8) Reading was an important consideration in a girl’s education whether learning took place in the home, a private girl’s academy, or a state-run school. However, as Catherine J. Golden puts it in her essay “Women Readers and Reading in Victorian Britain and America”, this education “prepared them for ‘elegant leisure’ without appreciating ‘that an inquiring spirit, a love of reading and an increasing interest in high and worthy subjects are of infinitely greater importance” as argued by Emily Davies.

In the short story, “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the very house in which the setting of the story is placed is described in a fashion that imparts an eerie feel to it. Gilman even calls it a “haunted house”. The very beginning of the story starts to build up unnatural images in the reader’s mind that anticipates the insanity which is a major theme in the play. The narrator declares that there is “something queer” about the house. The isolated

location of the house is symptomatic of isolation which the narrator faces as the story progresses and the isolation of the woman writer at large. The patriarchal Victorian world does not accommodate women who wish to create an identity for themselves or cater to their own needs. As Helga S. Puts it in “Behind the Wallpaper”, “...white men were the only human beings who were able to think and make logical decisions”. In such a condition, insanity is a space which is offered to women. In the story too, the narrator’s postpartum depression, which could have been cured, is pushed to the level of madness. The house itself is described as a place that binds and restricts. Hannah Carlson writes in her essay “Enclosed Women: On the Use of Enclosure Imagery by 19th-Century Female Authors to Expose Societal Oppression”, Gilman, as well as many other female authors throughout time, created physically enclosed spaces for her female protagonist to show how her sex was confined”. The room that the narrator is made to inhabit is “a big, airy room, the whole floor nearly, with windows that look all ways, and air and sunshine galore” (Gilman 74). Although the room appears to give a sense of big, open space, it is important to notice that this perception is false, for the windows of the room are “barred” (Gilman 74). The room is therefore, much like a Victorian marriage, which on the surface, gives the impression that the woman is protected and looked after and not loaded with work, but in reality she is actually being oppressed, and made to fit into a mould, by an ideology which makes her find fault in herself: The narrator says, “I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes” (Gilman 74). The image of the house is an important element for it symbolizes the ownership men had over females, “for not only a nineteenth-century woman writer have to inhabit ancestral mansions owned and built by men, but she was also constricted and restricted by the Palaces of Art and Houses of Fiction male writers authored” (Gilbert and Gubar).

The imagery which the narrator uses to describe the yellow wallpaper is representative of her own mental condition. She describes the pattern as “lame uncertain curves” (Gilman 75) which “suddenly commits suicide” (Gilman 75). “The color is repellent, almost revolting...a sickly sulphur...” (Gilman 75). It seems almost as if the wallpaper draws a physical picture of all that is working in her mind. Her brain is so constrained by the narrow confines of the patriarchal setup that her intellect remains unaccommodated and in trying to find a place for itself it starts losing its track. The “sickly sulphur” (Gilman 75) evokes a very ailing picture which is the essential condition of her mind. It paints a picture of her own diseased creativity, which again reminds us of the stifling society of which she is a part of. Negative images such as “bulbous eyes” (Gilman 77), “broken neck” (Gilman 77), “fungus growth” (Gilman 77) highlight the pessimism which has taken control of her mind because of the airless culture in which she is existing. This disapproval cannot be exhibited by her on the surface for the norms of the society expect her to be proper; it only ends up occupying her mind and revealing itself through her images.

The wallpaper is ugly, dirty and torn apart. According to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, the narrator finds herself and Gilbert uses the wallpaper as a symbol of society. The narrator of the story is an intelligent and creative woman and people like that are locked inside a room for a long period of time, their minds begin to search for something to focus on. “I used to lie awake as a child and get more entertainment and terror out of blank walls and plain furniture than most children could find in a toy-store” (Gilman 81)

Soon the narrator starts seeing the figure of a woman behind the pattern in the wallpaper. Just like the narrator is trapped by the societal norms and codes of conduct, the woman in the wallpaper is also trapped behind the bars. This woman now becomes a direct embodiment of the narrator herself and just like the narrator, she is trying to come out of those

bars and free herself. The image of the wallpaper as bars is parallel to the “barred windows” of the bedroom. The narrator does so through her writing which allows her to voice her opinions and feelings which otherwise remain unconsidered. The narrator puts it, “On a pattern like this, by daylight there is a lack of sequence, a defiance of law, that is a constant irritant to a normal mind” (Gilman 81): This is the law of the father that the so-called ‘sane’ patriarchal society upholds and any violation of which is not endured. The woman in the wallpaper is a product of the creative energy of the narrator which is not given an outlet by the culture. Only the writer within her can see this figure of the woman which can be said to be the quintessence of not only the narrator herself but of all the women of the time who have been oppressed by patriarchy and their creative energies have been suppressed. The wallpaper symbolizes every human being’s need to have the freedom and ability to create, write, enjoy nature, breathe fresh air and do whatever a person wishes to. Jane Thraikill, “The narrator recognizes the woman in the paper as herself, and suddenly sees her embodied, observing, recording self as the enemy, referring to her in the third person as Jane.” The protagonist broke from her social confinement by recognising the caged woman that existed within her and letting her free.

It is interesting to observe that the narrator sees the woman trapped behind the bars in the wallpaper at night. In “The Yellow Wallpaper”, moonlight represents the time for the feminine when she is sheltered from the ever-watching eyes around her. It is the only time when she can be herself and give way to her fancies. Hannah Carlson puts it as, “Lightness can be paralleled with the outward appearance of a middle-class, nineteenth-century woman, while darkness reflects her inward feelings. In the two descriptions above, the woman does not move in the light: she stays in one place, within her domestic role, in the house. It is her inner self in the darkness that is trying to break free from the bars of oppression”. According to Yin Cai-qiao, “In moonlight, men’s action and involvement is weak, women becomes the queen of the night, and Gilman’s arrangement of the appearance of the shape of woman in moonlight

symbolizes that women have been liberated from men's dominance". Interestingly, she also starts referring to the wallpaper as "the paper" (Gilman 85) which brings home the fact that the repressed literary bent in her has now started seeing the wallpaper as her writing paper on which she can let her creative energies flow. At one point in the story, she says, "I'm getting really fond of the room in spite of the wallpaper. Perhaps *because* of the wallpaper" (Gilman 78).

The image of the night and moon is therefore associated with a certain kind of freedom in the story. In traditional culture, moonlight is also associated with lunacy, which again is the only space patriarchy offers to women who defy the norm or fail to fit it. The fact that the writer in the narrator sees the woman in the wallpaper come out at night indicates that the creative side of the narrator will never be accepted by society and then lunacy will be the only option left for her.

There is, thus, a binary created in the story by the difference in the activities and images of day and night. This is reminiscent of the patriarchal binary which operates in the society. The narrator says that the woman in the wallpaper is "subdued, quiet" (Gilman 82) during the day. The narrator finds the daytime "tiresome and perplexing" (Gilman 83). In the moonlight the paper appears different to her: "By moonlight...I wouldn't know it was the same paper" (Gilman 82). With the help of these binaries Gilman brings home the essence of the message which her short story endeavours to convey.

Katherine Mansfield is one of the few women writers who have established a name on the basis of only the short story form. She instrumentally employs imagery as an effective means to satirize the naivety and pretensions of her characters in her short story "Bliss". The central image in the story is that of the pear tree which is located in the protagonist Bertha Young's garden. This central image of the story serves to underline the main subject of the story. The pear tree is bisexual in nature and therefore contains both male and female reproductive organs. Sometimes, the anther of such trees ripens before the stigma is mature

enough to receive it. In this case self-fertilization does not take place. These flowers can also not be cross-pollinated; hence eventually no fertilization takes place. Thus, a pear tree which on the surface looks perfect, may actually be sterile. This significance of the pear tree in full bloom is also pointed by Helen Nebeker in her “The Critics”. This disparity between the appearance and reality is what constitutes the Victorian marriage which on the surface appears to be faultless, but shows signs of complexities on a closer look, much like the alliance of Bertha and Harry. This relationship clearly shows signs of flaws such as communication gap and lack of intimacy. “What had she to say? She’d nothing to say. She only wanted to get in touch with him for a moment” (Mansfield 152), “...she’d been in love with him, of course, in every other way, but just not in that way” (Mansfield 159). She repeatedly tries to convince herself that she is happy and fulfilled, “Really- really- she had everything”. She has the knowledge that there is something lacking. She is “waiting for something divine to happen” (Mansfield 150).

The excess of “bliss” which the protagonist Bertha feels in the story can be attributed to her awakened sexual desire for her husband Harry or for Miss Pearl Fulton, whom Bertha admires a lot. The bisexual tendencies of Bertha can be compared to the pear tree which has both the male and female reproductive organs. It is interesting to note that the last words that Miss Fulton tells Bertha are “Your lovely pear tree...”, thus extending the identification of Bertha with the pear tree. Furthermore, she even dresses for the dinner party in a colour scheme that mirrors her description of the pear tree. Bertha is in her thirties, yet is full of vivacity and vigour. In a similar fashion, the pear tree “had not a single bud or a faded petal”.

Mansfield also uses the imagery of the fruit to signify fertility. As Bertha gets the things ready for the dinner party, she asks her nanny for “tangerines and apples stained with strawberry pink. Some yellow pears, smooth as silk, some white grapes covered with a silver bloom and a big cluster of purple ones”. It is interesting to note that all these fruits are plump

and round, representing fullness, good health and fertility. Further, she arranges these fruits in a pyramid thus suggesting the love triangle between Bertha, Harry and Miss Pearl Fulton, which is apparent in the story.

As has been pointed out earlier, the image of the pear tree is symbolic of Bertha and her sexual duality. The image of the moon and moonlight also becomes important as Bertha imagines the pear tree in the moonlight: “It would be silver now, in the light of poor dear Eddie’s moon, silver as Miss Fulton...” Moon is a recurrent image which she attaches with Miss Fulton: “And then Miss Fulton, all in silver, with a silver fillet binding her pale blonde hair...” (Mansfield 156). As Mauracio da Silva Silveira points out, inextricably connected with a ‘pearl’ with is the colour silver which is also the colour associated with moon and moonlight. Further, moon is conventionally associated with femininity due to its twenty-eight day cycles, which is closely related to the female menstrual cycle. As Bertha’s homosexual urges heighten, she identifies with the phallic image of the pear-tree that is so desperately growing ‘taller and taller’ in order to touch the rim of the pale, silver moon. This symbolic union of the phallic pear tree and the feminine moon is symptomatic of the sexual union that Bertha desires to have with Pearl.

Another recurrent and important imagery in the poem is that of fire. The interpretations of fire imagery is multiple and ambiguous for if fire can warm and illuminate, it can also burn. In the story, Bertha is consumed by shower of sparks which could be interpreted as being in a state of uncontrollable infatuation, which can also consume one’s soul. She is so excited and happy that she cannot find the words to express her emotions. She mentions such “sparks” (Mansfield 150) more than once. According to Mauracio da Silva Silveira, “It could be the feeling of anticipation of some event to which she is looking forward to”. The reference to fire capable of burning and destroying becomes specially significant here, as the “sparks” which

Bertha feels, on one hand warm her soul, but they can also become destructive if she gives in to her impulses, because of the social stigma attached to a homosexual relationship.

The imageries and visual details employed by the author provide the bridge between the outer lives of the characters and what goes on within their mind. The title of the story probably draws from the idea that ignorance is bliss as that seems to be the case for Bertha. Nothing is finally resolved in the story. The conflict is unconventional and deals with the narrator's internal consciousness. Her denial is a major contributor to the conflict. The sexual awakening which she feels for her husband, which leads to the feeling of bliss, is actually an attraction felt for Pearl Fulton. Bertha's last name finally becomes instrumental in portraying how young, naive and uninformed she is.

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